

44 COMMENTARY ON MACAULAY'S
HISTORY

The contrast between what happened and what might have happened was with Seeley part of the systematic method of ' turning narrative into problems ', which seemed to him the best way of understanding English history.

So long as you think of history as a mere chronological narrative, so long you are in the old literary groove which leads to no trustworthy knowledge, but only to that pompous conventional romancing of which all serious men are tired. Break the drowsy spell of narrative ; ask yourself questions ; set yourself problems.¹

Macaulay, whose object was not didactic, employs these contrasts purely as a rhetorical device. He suggests a problem now and then, but does not pause to examine seriously the might-have-beens of history. The questions upon which he prefers to expatiate are the practical questions which the statesmen of the seventeenth century had to solve. To discuss these, he is willing to interrupt for a moment the flow of his story, and he suspends it again and again to introduce the descriptions of persons or scenes in the time-honoured fashion of all narrative historians.

Macaulay's gallery of historical portraits is unusually comprehensive. It includes not only the great actors, but the minor personages who appear for a minute on the stage. He has been charged with unfairness to particular persons.

Whether his conception of a man's character
is right or
wrong, the man's person is clearly and
vividly depicted.
He realises the actors in the drama as if they
were present
before his eyes, and he is determined that his
readers shall
see them too in flesh and blood. For
instance, his hero,
King William :

His external appearance is almost as well
known to us as
to his own captains and counsellors.
Sculptors, painters,

¹ J. R. Seeley, *The Expansion of England* (1900), pp. 189,
202-3.